

No Other Gospel Frees Us

Galatians 4:8-5:10 (NIV)

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. ¹² I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. ¹³ As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷ Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. ¹⁸ It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. ¹⁹ My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! ²¹ Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³ His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. ²⁴ These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ For it is written: “Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.” ²⁸ Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. ³⁰ But what does Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.” ³¹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. ¹ It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. ⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ⁸ That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” ¹⁰ I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.

We live in the land of the free and the home of the brave, but how far does that freedom extend? Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Yet the very same government that upholds these words does not let any one of us do whatever we want in regards to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If you want something that’s not yours, you can’t just take it. That’s stealing, and you will be arrested, fined, and forced to give it back. In the pursuit of happiness, you may want to find out whether or not your speedometer really goes all the way to 120 mph, but if you do that on I-15, you’re going to get pulled over and at least lose points on your license, if not lose it all together.

Laws are good. The speed limit is in place so that I am less likely to kill myself or others on the interstate. Laws serve to protect a possible victim from theft. Laws serve people, but they do limit our freedom, don’t they? Are we slaves to these laws? Should we be? In our section of Galatians for today, Paul really gets into the heart of the matter of slavery vs. freedom with the Gospel.

Paul reminds the Galatians what they were before they heard and believed the Gospel. “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.” (chapter 4, verse 8) Paul calls these “not gods” weak and miserable forces, the things they believed in before they heard the Gospel. The Gospel taught them of the one true God, of God the Father who sent God the Son who came down from heaven and completed the law for them, sacrificed himself for them to declare them not guilty before him of all the wrongs they had committed. God the Holy Spirit gave them faith to believe this message that their salvation was in Christ alone, that only he had set them free from their sin and from working out their own salvation covering them instead with his perfect life lived under the law. This is the Gospel that freed them from slavery to those other weak and miserable forces that demanded them to do more and more to work out their righteousness without ever being satisfied or ever completing it.

Now, this circumcision group, also known as the Judaizers, were teaching that Christ had set them free, but they still had to at least be circumcised and live like a Jew. They had to observe special days and months and seasons and years if they wanted to be saved. Whether intentional or not, they were enslaving people to the law. In frustration, maybe exasperation, Paul declares: “But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.” (chapter 4 verses 9-11) Will you go back to being a slave to the law all over again?

The Judaizers had taken the Gospel and turned it into a law, into slavery. Their demands pulled them and others away from the Gospel, away from Christ. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” (chapter 5 verses 2-4) If they get circumcised, if they follow these Judaizers, they are effectively declaring, “God, what you did for me wasn’t good enough. In fact, I don’t need you. I’m going to take care of this on my own. I will work out my righteousness and my salvation by living obedient to the law.” If you say that there is one thing that you have to do for God, you are putting yourself under the slavery of the law, that you have to live according to all the laws perfectly, all the time. When you do this, Christ is of no value to you because you are rejecting what he has already done for you. Even one little work like circumcision when added to the Gospel enslaves us to the law because “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” (chapter 5 verse 9)

Do we make ourselves slaves to the law? Although we are probably not being pressured to get circumcised and eat a Jewish diet, we have other good and God-pleasing things that we add to the Gospel and so take away our freedom in Christ and enslave us to obey them. Is this you? To know, you must examine your heart, your attitude toward these things. Coming to church for worship, Bible Study, Sunday School, etc. is good and God-pleasing as you get to learn more and more about what God has done for you and he strengthens your faith through his Word. However, if church and Bible Study and Sunday School are pretty much just obligations of what I must do in order to have God forgive me, I have then become enslaved to them as I try to be justified by these actions while at the same time alienating myself from Christ saying that there is more that I have to do than what he did for me. There are good reasons to push yourself to come to church when you don’t want to, to get up that extra hour for Bible study, not because the action saves you but because you get to spend time reveling in God’s grace for you, his undeserved love for you. It’s a constant reminder of how God loves you, forgives you, and saves you so completely. How do I approach these things? Am I enslaved to doing good thinking that this will make me right with God, make me forgiven? Am I putting myself under a yoke of slavery all over again?

Abraham found himself in that position. In Genesis, when God called Abraham, he promised to make Abraham into a great nation with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and that all nations would be blessed through his offspring. But Abraham was already 75 years old and had no children when he received this promise. The window was quickly closing where he and his wife Sarah could have kids. In an effort to “help” God’s promise, Sarah told Abraham to take her maidservant, Hagar, and have a child with her. From that union came Ishmael. Sarah figured that if Abraham could have a child this way, they would help God fulfill his promise and bring about that salvation that would bless all nations. They took their salvation into their own hands. By doing this, they had enslaved themselves to the law instead of living the freedom of trusting God to act and fulfill his promises.

Ishmael was not the child of the promise; he was the child of the slave woman, Hagar. God waited another 14 years, until Abraham and Sarah were beyond child-bearing years, to then have Isaac born to them. Isaac came about only because of God’s promise and action, not as a result of Abraham’s and Sarah’s attempts to work out God’s plan of salvation for themselves. Isaac was the result of God’s promise, the child born of the free woman.

Christ has set you free. You are children of God by virtue of a promise, God’s promise, not by what you do or have done. You are like Isaac, Abraham’s and Sarah’s son. You have been justified, declared not guilty, before God because God carried out his promise of sending the Savior through the line of Abraham, the offspring who would be a blessing to all nations. You believe this because God the Holy Spirit has worked that faith, that trust, in you. You are known to God and have been clothed with Christ’s identity by the work of God, not yours. Christ has set you free from your sin, from the law, from your deserved condemnation. This is the Gospel!

No other Gospel frees us, but anything we do when we make it a requirement to have God’s love and his forgiveness enslaves us all over again. Paul is pleading for the spiritual lives of the Galatians and us when he quotes God’s Word from Genesis, from the free woman, Sarah: “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.” (chapter 4 verse 30) Don’t take up things as if the doing of things will save you; they’ll only enslave you. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (chapter 5 verse 1) Instead, as children of God by his promise, just like Isaac, “through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (chapter 5 verses 5-6)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are free because of what God has done for you, because of the Gospel. In our freedom, we do not harm others, endanger lives, or disregard God’s law or even governmental laws. Instead, our faith in the Gospel expresses itself through love – love for God, love for each other. Next time we dive into Galatians, we will focus on how God wants us to express that faith through this freedom won for us by Christ. No other Gospel frees us. Amen.